1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Mankato Area Transportation And Planning Study 2003 (MATAPS 2003) is an update to the comprehensive regional transportation planning study completed in 1996 (MATAPS '96). The 2003 update covers the Cities of Mankato and North Mankato, as well as the five township areas surrounding these Cities in Blue Earth, Nicollet and Le Sueur Counties.

The update was undertaken by the six governmental agencies that completed the original study in 1996, along with a new partner, Le Sueur County. The agencies included the Minnesota Department of Transportation, Blue Earth County, Le Sueur County, Nicollet County, the City of Mankato and the City of North Mankato. This group is commonly referred to as "Partners" or "planning partners" throughout the report. The partnership between the six agencies was originally organized to provide a platform from which long-range regional transportation goals and policies could be discussed and developed. The success of this partnership in implementing the study findings and recommendations from the 1996 study reflects the efforts made by all parties to improve interagency cooperation and to develop appropriate planning structures and tools to address transportation needs in the area.

In 2001, the partners agreed that many short- and mid-term objectives of the original MATAPS study had been completed, including:

- Completion of Mankato South Route (Blue Earth County CSAH 90)
- Opening of Trunk Highway (TH) 14 east of Mankato
- Completion of TH 22 realignment
- Numerous jurisdiction changes
- Planning and first phase of construction of the Victory Drive extension

In addition, a number of key policy initiatives had occurred, including development of the Interregional Corridor System and Mn/DOT's new Access Management Guidelines. As a result, the partners felt MATAPS should be updated. The two main goals for the study are as follows:

- To provide a foundation for the development of a transportation system that will serve the anticipated growth and projected travel needs for Mankato area residents and businesses over the next 20 years.

- To continue to promote interagency cooperation between local, state and regional agencies by enhancing the necessary planning structures and tools.

In addition, the partners established six objectives for the study. They are as follows:

1. Understand new and ongoing transportation problems.
2. Obtain a better understanding of recent growth trends and develop a transportation system that accommodates future growth.
3. Build a better understanding of how transportation modes interact.

4. Continue to improve cooperation and coordination among the counties, cities, townships, the region and the state in the study area.

5. Identify long-term transportation system improvements and preserve transportation corridors.

6. Update the cooperative investment plan so that projects can continue to be implemented in a timely manner.

1.1 STUDY LOCATION

The Mankato area is located at the confluence of the Minnesota and Blue Earth rivers, approximately 80 miles southwest of the Twin Cities (Figure 1). The Minnesota River separates the City of North Mankato and Nicollet County to the north and west of the City of Mankato and Blue Earth County. The Cities of Mankato and North Mankato began as river communities with the Minnesota River serving as the primary means of transporting goods and people from the area.

The area is predominately rolling agricultural land with scattered wooded ravines that carve their way into the larger river valleys. While the rolling terrain, wooded ravines and river add to the area's views and charm, they also lead to significant transportation challenges, due to the physical barriers they create.

A detailed study was by The planning partners established an area to be studied in deail. That area includes the area bounded by the outer limits of Belgrade, Lime, Mankato and South Bend Townships in Blue Earth and Nicollet Counties, and South Kasota Township in Le Sueur County. While the study focused on these areas, it is recognized that transportation issues within the study area are influenced by factors outside the detailed study area. Therefore, a larger area denoted as the "area of influence" was considered when developing the overall plan and conducting special area studies.

1.2 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Public participation for MATAPS 2003 was accomplished using a variety of approaches:

- A Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) was established by the partners to actively guide and participate in the development of the transportation plan. The work group included engineers and planning staff from each of the planning partners. This group met monthly throughout the development of the plan to review technical analysis and provide input into the study process. Active participation by partners in the work group sessions ensured that the study addressed particular concerns and issues raised by each of the partners.

- A policy advisory committee (PAC) of elected officials was also established as part of the study update. The PAC met twice during the course of the study to review and provide comment on the direction of the study, as well as to review the comments and concerns of local residents.

FIGURE 1 – Study area and existing transportation system

- Small-group meetings were held with stakeholders and interested community and business groups early in the study process to identify issues and/or concerns (eight meetings). The issues were documented and organized into groups according to the type of issue (i.e., safety, capacity, system, etc.). Figures 2 and 3 show the issues identified during the study. In addition to showing the issues in Figures 2 and 3, a comprehensive database was developed to document and address each issue. The database included:

  - Issue description
  - General location of issue
  - Type of roadway
  - Primary agency responsible
  - Coordinating agencies
  - Level of cooperation among partners to address the issue
  - Specific recommendations
  - Notes on the issue as a reference to the primary agency

  The recommendations identified in the database range from minor improvements to significant capital investments, to recommendations for additional analysis. Each of the issues and its associated recommendations were examined by the study partners and were prioritized based on regional importance. The regional rankings were used to help develop the implementation plan and the long-term regional transportation improvements for the area.

  Appendix B contains the issue database; please refer to it for specific details on particular issues.

- An open house was held to obtain input on study findings and recommendations. In addition to collecting input from the public, the open house highlighted important study information and draft study recommendations.

- A study website was developed to highlight information about the study and to display the final report to members of the public.

1.3 SIGNIFICANT POLICY CHANGES

Since the completion of the original MATAPS plan in 1997, Mn/DOT adopted two significant policies that impact the Mankato area. The first policy, adopted in 1999, was the creation of the Interregional Corridor (IRC) System. The IRC System was developed by Mn/DOT to support statewide economic activity by maintaining safe, timely and efficient transportation between regional trade centers. The IRC system consists of approximately 2,900 miles of the state's principal and minor arterial roadways that connect the Twin Cities metropolitan area with primary and secondary regional trade centers in Greater Minnesota. Of the 2,900 miles, about two-thirds (1,900) are identified as Medium Priority IRCs and approximately one-third are identified as High Priority IRCs. In the MATAPS study area, TH 169 and TH 14 have been identified as Medium Priority IRCs.

Figure 2 – Issues (North)

Figure 3 – Issues (South)

Because of the significant role that these corridors play in the state's economic well-being, Mn/DOT has begun to develop Corridor Management Plans (CMPs) for those roadways that are most threatened by congestion and traffic signal proliferation. One of the corridors selected for a CMP was the 73-mile section of TH 169 from Interstate 494 in the Twin Cities to TH 60 south of Mankato. The TH 169 CMP was recently completed in 2002 and recommended that TH 169 transition to a freeway through Mankato. This long-term vision means that current signals at Lind/Webster should be removed over time and new traffic signals be avoided unless there is an immediate safety need. In the event of a safety need, the temporary installation of a traffic signal requires a credible plan for the removal of the traffic signal and the eventual construction of an interchange. At this time, a comprehensive CMP has not been developed for TH 14; however, TH 14 is a freeway facility through the Mankato-North Mankato area now, and the vision is to maintain this as growth occurs.

The second major policy was the development of new access management guidelines for all state roadways. For a number of years, Mn/DOT has expressed the importance of managing access in order to improve the safety and mobility of the highway system. The new access management guidelines are based on the roadway's functional classification and its proximity to population centers. The new access management guidelines will provide more direction to the partners with respect to the number and location of accesses on roadways within the study area.